

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



## **Impaired Waterway List Provokes Farmer to Act**

Camp Creek, in Polk County, is only 14.8 miles long. When it showed up on the 2002 Environmental Protection Agency list of impaired waterways, Don Soutter said he was very surprised. Since major tributaries of Camp Creek go through his farm, he decided to contact Paul Miller at the Polk County USDA Service Center to develop a plan for protecting the water quality of the impaired waterway.

Miller is a District Conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), a USDA agency that provides free technical assistance to help farmers and others improve their land through conservation planning.

Miller and his staff worked with Soutter to address the resource concerns on his 200-acres of land. They suggested Soutter join the Camp Creek Watershed Advisory Committee (CCWAC), a local group of people that sets and promotes conservation priorities for the watershed. Soutter agreed, joined the committee, and started working aggressively on addressing the erosion problems on his own land.

Camp Creek runs south through southeast Polk County with short segments in Jasper County. Fifty percent of the watershed's land is highly erodible which contributes to heavy sediment loading in the creek. The creek is used as a water source for livestock and it is also used for recreational purposes, particularly at the 175-acre Thomas Mitchell Park, where fishing and wading are common, at least in past years. The Polk County Conservation Board now says the park's five-acre pond is unhealthy and dying, in



*Don Soutter*

part, to silt filling up the pond and reduced oxygen levels that killed most of the pond's fish.

A 2005 Iowa Department of Natural Resources report on the Camp Creek Watershed concluded too much soil was entering the creek. Soil carries water-polluting chemicals, including land-applied phosphorus and nitrates. The report cited non-point sheet and rill erosion from agricultural land, stream banks and gully erosion as the sources of the soil.

On his farm, Soutter saw that gully erosion his father fixed in the late 1940s with World War II surplus bulldozers, was back. Former Camp Creek Watershed Coordinator Tim Terrell suggested using a package of Environmental Quality Incentives Pro-

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*

gram (EQIP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Watershed Protection Funds (WSPF), and Iowa Financial Incentive Program (IFIP) funds to fix the gully and install terraces and grassed waterways.

Soutter looked at the package and said, "I had gully erosion on my land and there was extra cost share to address the problem. That kind of chance comes around only once a lifetime so it needed it and I did it."

The construction work on that first project was in the fall of 2004. Soutter remembers many farmer friends and neighbors stopping by to look at the earth being moved and to discuss what he was doing. There was one older neighbor in particular that Soutter said was not happy with the project. "Your father would be spinning in his grave seeing you do that," the neighbor told him.



*NRCS District Conservationist Paul Miller stands with farmer Don Soutter and Watershed Coordinator Brandon Dittman in a buffer strip designed to keep soil out of Camp Creek, an EPA listed impaired waterway. Conservation practices installed on Soutter's 200 acres are credited with keeping 300 tons of soil per year from entering the impaired waterway.*

A year later, Soutter said that same neighbor saw the finished project and started asking him questions: "What did that cost? What can I do to get part of that?"

A short time later the once skeptical neighbor came to the NRCS office asking what he could

do on his Camp Creek Watershed farm to prevent soil erosion.

Soutter continues to use technical help and financial assistance to install soil saving practices on his farmland. Over the past three

years Soutter has installed seven acres of grassed waterways, three water and sediment control structures, four acres of filter strips and implemented 185 acres of nutrient management. As a result, ephemeral gullies have been controlled, there is more wildlife habitat and Soutter says there are cost savings from the more efficient application of manure and commercial nutrient applications. "That kind of application of conservation practices is," says Miller, "leading to improved water quality and more wildlife, especially pheasants."

There are visible improvements being made in the Camp Creek Watershed as well. Soutter says, "Get in the car and look around and you can see filter strips. It may be missing from one farm or the other, but from a windshield glance, you can now see many more filter strips and buffer strips there now. It's those buffer strips that catch soil sediment in the first five feet of grass. That strip prevents that fine dirt from washing into the creek and polluting it."

The 62-year-old Soutter, who has been farming since 1966, enjoys the conservation side of farming. Besides serving on the CCWAC, in 2004 Soutter was appointed a commissioner on the Polk County Soil and Water Conservation District board. In 2006, he was elected to serve a full term.

What is ahead for Soutter? In 2008 he'll use additional financial assistance funds to build more grade stabilization structures and waterways on his land. He'll also be setting an example for others to follow in the watershed and in Polk County. "It only makes sense," said Soutter, "to save the soil because you only have so much ground. There is no reason at all to see it go down the drain."

*By Dick Tremain, Public Affairs Specialist  
USDA-NRCS, Des Moines  
January 2008*

**Helping People Help the Land**

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.